WHEN BRUCE LEE CAME TO AMERICA

A Student Remembers

by Michael J. Heenan

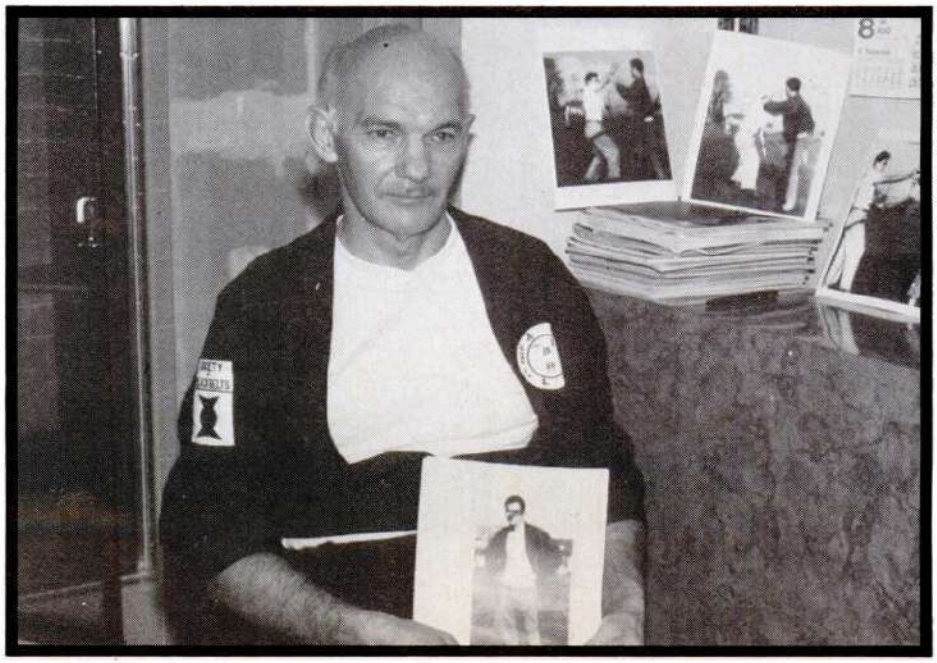
Bruce Lee founded the Jun Fan Gung Fu (Bruce Lee Kung Fu) Institute in Seattle during the early 1960s. From that school, some currently prominent martial artists can justifiably claim a legitimate direct association. More importantly, those early days of training under the legendary martial artist provided a catalyst and inspiration for those students who later became outstanding teachers in their own right. Among these is Joseph Cowles.

Cowles was granted membership in Lee's school before it was established in the Seattle Chinatown basement location which served as the original Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute. "In those early days we simply worked out in a student's yard, playgrounds or schoolyards," Cowles recalls. "After the Chinatown basement location was obtained, I was privileged to be a contemporary student with Linda Emery, who was later to become (Bruce's wife) Linda Lee."

Cowles, who is distinguished in his own right as the founder and chief instructor of the Wu Wei/Mo Wai Fighting Arts Association and holds the position of Western States Executive Director in the Society of Black Belts of America, remembers

Photo by D.V. Chang

Bruce Lee's search for a proper school location. "One day Bruce came to my apartment at the Holly Park Housing Project in Seattle while we were trying to find a permanent place to work out," Cowles says. "He expressed some pleasure at seeing some Oriental decorations I had in my living room. Then he walked over to the Boys Club next door where I was teaching the fundamentals of judo each week. I had told Bruce he could use the stage area for the kung fu class. But after looking it over, Bruce decided against it because he thought there would be too many interruptions and curious boys around to hold a class there."



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Joseph Cowles, pictured right holding a photo of the late Bruce Lee, was one of the great martial artist's first students, training with Lee at several Seattle locations. Lee met his wife, Linda Emery (pictured above with their daughter Shannon), at the University of Washington.

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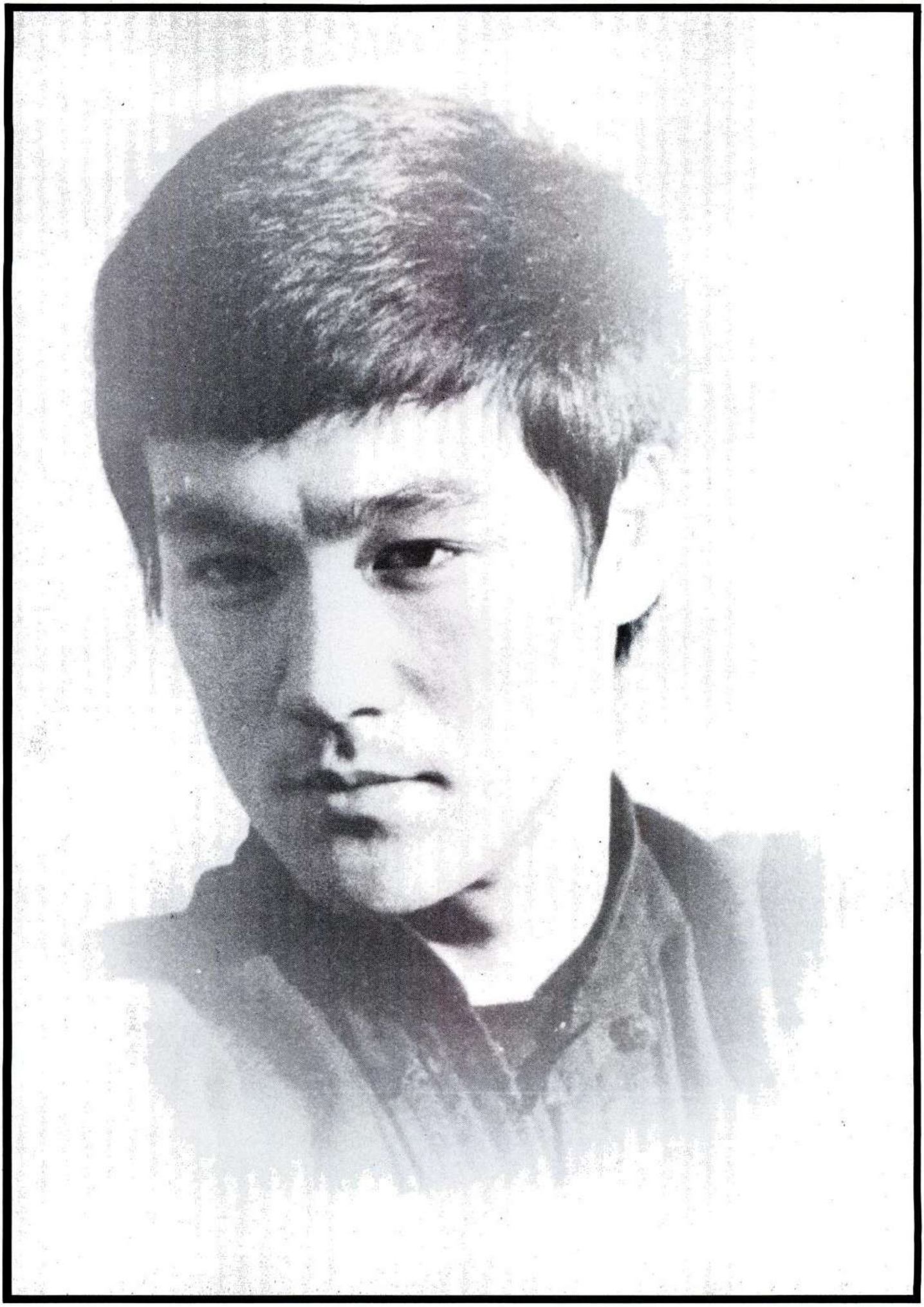

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With the ever-present image of Bruce Lee in the background, Cowles works through a kung fu exercise with a senior student at his Texas school. Cowles teaches and heads a style known as wu-wei kung fu.

It was some time afterward that Lee obtained the old basement in Chinatown. "It seems strange to reminisce now that down those steps in that old basement was a young man teaching kung fu to about 20 or 30 students who was destined to become one of the most highly regarded and widely known martial artists of all time," Cowles notes.

A short time later, the school was moved to the University of Washington, Seattle district. "The only uniform we wore in those days," Cowles relates, "was a very short black vest, secured in front with a gold cord and a Chinese knot. Bruce had a Chinese lady make some *yin/yang* (complementary aspects of life) emblems for us too. This was not the later jeet kune do emblem, but just the yin/yang itself. Later Bruce added encircling arrows on the emblem and on our membership cards. The complete uniforms some of us had were never worn in class. They were only used for demonstrations and were considered just the same as owning a tuxedo."

The university district school was expansive. "Bruce had living quarters in the back of this school," Cowles says. "One day he invited me to come back and see his beautiful teakwood furniture which had arrived from Hong Kong. It had a very high gloss so the finish looked like glass. I think he was very proud of this furniture, and it really was quite elegant."

Cowles remembers a day some visitors came to the school and, after talking with them, Lee demonstrated a kick. "Using me for the target, his kick whipped out very fast, and I could hear it pop right by my eye," Cowles recalls. "I didn't flinch, though, because I knew he was very accurate. When he saw that I didn't flinch, his kick came even closer, and each time there was a popping sound right by my eye."

Another time Lee demonstrated his one-inch punch. "He placed a chair a few feet behind a young man who was visiting the school," Cowles relates, "then with just a slight movement, he struck the man on the chest. The effect was startling. It was like a big hand had slapped the man on his chest very hard, and he shot backward into the chair, and the chair skidded on the floor. Evidently the man was duly impressed, because he joined Bruce's school."

One of Cowles' friends couldn't help but be impressed the day he decided to test Lee's skills. "My friend had become extremely fast with a particular punch," Cowles recalls. "He had long arms and he would often fire that punch at me so fast that he would hit me on the nose with his palm. He didn't hit hard, but it got so that I almost got annoyed because most of the time I couldn't block his punch. One day this student decided to try this punch on Bruce.

Bruce Lee could train anywhere, be it on a rooftop (right above), in a field (right), or in a living room (far right). His first school was located in a Seattle Chinatown basement.

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This, by the way, was unethical. We were not allowed to hit each other in class. We were always told to 'come two inches from our partner and stop.' Thus, there was a surprise for Bruce when this student actually hit him during a sparring demonstration in class. Compounding this insult was the fact there was a karateka watching who had previously challenged Bruce to a fight. Bruce had beaten the karateka in about 11 seconds of that serious duel."

The first time Cowles' friend hit Lee, the teacher responded by sweeping the man's feet out from under him. The second time, the man received a swift kick in the groin. After class, Lee called the student over and said, "The next time you hit me in front of that karate guy, I'm *really* going to work you over."

"Bruce was very good at getting his point across like that," Cowles says. "On my first day in his class I noticed two students practicing an arm-banging exercise called *sam-sing*, which was designed to toughen the forearms. The students slammed their forearms together over and over in this exercise. I decided to try it, and I practiced with an older student. I really wasn't trying to be a tough guy, but Bruce didn't know that since it was my first day there, and to top it off, the other student quit since my arms just happened to be tougher than his were. So Bruce walked up to me and said, 'Let's see how long you can go with me!'

"So we started going harder and harder. All at once Bruce's fist flew up and he struck me in the right temple so hard that the following week, every time I would eat, I could feel the bruise hurting me. 'You didn't get your hand up in time,' Bruce said pleasantly. Still I did not get the hint he was letting me know I'd better stop. So I kept hitting his forearms, and then I noticed he really started pouring it on. So I thought I'd better stop. He's the teacher. I said 'That's enough.' Bruce looked at me in a friendly way, yet said very bluntly, 'Don't be a hero. If it hurts, stop. Or I'll break your damned arm.' My first lesson was indeed one to remember."

After that lesson, Lee drove back from Mercer Island to Seattle with Cowles, telling his new student he admired him for beginning kung fu practice at his age (Cowles was 32 when he began studying under Lee). The new student asked his instructor how long it would take to learn kung fu. "The memory of his reply jolted me when I viewed the reports and pictures of his funeral a few years later," Cowles notes. "Bruce's answer was 'You never quit learning until they close the lid on your coffin.' How little did we realize his own words were to come true so soon for him."

Cowles got a good indication of Lee's impressive physical strength one day when the teacher took him to the Tai Tung Cafe in Seattle's Chinatown and bought dinner. "He took my little spiral notebook and drew some kung fu stances in it for me," Cowles reminisces. "While we were discussing kung fu, he reached across the table to demonstrate his arm wrestling. I grabbed his hand, and without our arms touching the table, we started. But it was no contest. I felt like I would feel if I'd grabbed hold of a machine that was turning. Bruce turned my arm so fast I felt completely helpless to stop him. In fact, I felt like my arm would break if I tried to

***The career possibilities California offered eventually lured Bruce away from Seattle. His first major role was as Kato in the 1966 television series* The Green Hornet.**

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stop his force.

"I recall once when my friend, Lee Norman, told Bruce he'd met a boxer who boasted he could probably beat Bruce or knock him out," Cowles continues. "Bruce just looked at Norman and asked, 'Do you think he can do it?' Norman said, 'No, I don't. I just thought I'd have him come down so you could show him a few things.' But Bruce said, 'You're right, he can't. What you think is all that matters. If he wants to kill himself, let him go ahead, but don't invite him to do it.' "

Throughout Cowles' early days of training at the Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute, there was one recurring theme his teacher stressed: The person who talked a lot didn't really know much, and the person who did not talk a lot invariably was the one who knew the most because such a person did not have to go around proving it to himself and others. "When Bruce had his fight with the karateka," Cowles recalls, "he *did* tell us about it. We were in his class. But when people would come up to him on the University of Washington campus and say, 'Hey, did you know that so-and-so has a black eye?' Bruce would just say, 'Oh, really?' But he wouldn't tell them he had given it to him. The karateka thanked Bruce for that and joined his class. However, he did not last long because Bruce said he just wanted to learn some things to teach his own karate students.

"This same man had bragged to me how he had challenged Bruce to fight him, and Bruce had turned him down," Cowles adds. "And this bragging took place before I even knew Bruce. Nor did I know the karateka other than by a chance acquaintance. So I didn't know why he was bragging to me. Later, he made the mistake of confronting Bruce on the University of Washington campus. Bruce said the man walked right up to him and stared right in his face. Then he reached out, shoved Bruce aside and walked past him. Bruce said to us, 'As long as he talked, I just let him talk. But when he put his hands on me, then I accepted his challenge.' He fought the man at the Seattle YMCA in a handball court. According to Ed Hart, who kept time on his watch, Bruce beat the karateka in 11 seconds. Incidentally, the karateka told people his injuries were the result of a car accident."

The school's existence in the university district was short-lived when Lee began traveling more. After the teacher took a trip to California and met martial artists such as James Lee, Wally Jay and Ed Parker, he began expressing an interest in living in that area. The school soon relocated to the old Chinatown basement, the original location of the Jun Fan Institute.

Photo by James O. Sneddon

Bruce moved his first U.S. school from Seattle's Chinatown to the University of Washington district (above). He attended the university (right), where he met Linda Emery, his eventual wife.

Cowles recalls an examination he took under Lee just before his teacher left on a trip to Hong Kong. "After we tested," Cowles says, "he would have each student approach his desk at one end of the basement and say something personal to every person individually. After I tested and Bruce gestured for me to approach his desk, he began talking to me. He was looking down at a paper on the desk and was speaking too low for me to hear what he was saying. So, in order to hear him, I started to step around the desk to his side. But Bruce, without a pause, simply reached out and put his hand on my shoulder and then gently but firmly pushed me back in front of the desk. He continued talking but raised his voice for me to hear him. He told me he liked my attitude and, when he returned from Hong Kong, he might make me one of his assistant instructors. Needless to say, I was thrilled to hear him say that to me."

Encouraged by Lee's words, Cowles worked out for some time after his teacher went to Hong Kong. Time elapsed and Cowles admitted his training began tapering off in Lee's absence. "I guess I just missed having him there in person, since his presence really drew me out and made me want to do my very best—and I'm sure he had the same effect on other serious students too," Cowles notes. "But that short drop-out was a foolish mistake, and I'm sure Bruce really took note of it. I returned to class and Bruce said nothing further to me about being an assistant instructor.

"Sometime later I moved across the bay from Seattle, but I would catch the ferry and attend class anyway," Cowles continues. "Then one day I gathered my courage and called Bruce before class. With mounting apprehension I blurted out, '*Sifu* (teacher), do you think I could teach?' He didn't give me a direct answer but instead told me he would see me at the class. However, when I went to

Bruce Lee's gravesite (below) is located in Seattle, his United States roots. His headstone reads: "Bruce Lee, Nov. 27, 1940-July 20, 1973, Founder of Jeet Kune Do."

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class, Bruce was not there. Even with my apprehension about his answer, I still was disappointed not to see him. After class (Lee's assistant) Taky Kimura gave me a ride back to the ferry terminal. Then he told me Bruce had to go somewhere earlier. Taky handed me an envelope Bruce had asked him to give me. On the front was written: 'To Joseph Cowles—Present.' Inside was a letter in which Bruce stated the rules of the school prohibited anyone from teaching *outside* the school. 'Even Taky,' Bruce said, 'can only teach within the school itself.' And he signed it 'Regretfully, Bruce Lee.'

"This is why, over the years," Cowles adds, "I have sought to honor Bruce as my sifu from my heart and not involve any claim of building upon his schools or 'representing' jeet kune do or the Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute—but still honoring Bruce, the times with him, his example and his teaching, as I always will. In answering his letter, I assured him I understood and I would continue trying hard to learn and improve. There are those who are well-qualified and *are* teaching from that school, but Bruce never *appointed* teachers there, except Taky, as he said, 'within the school itself.' "

There was one time, according to Cowles, when Lee told the class he heard someone had been giving demonstrations of kung fu. "He let the class know this was forbidden, and if a demonstration was to be given, he and those he appointed would give it, and nobody else." Cowles says. "In those days we were instructed not to visit other schools for the purpose of sparring or in any way that could be considered reproachful upon our art or our school. Also, if we did not try hard to work out as we should, then we were 'not a part of the Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute' even though we attended classes there. Such was an example of the discipline under Bruce. But, as one can clearly see in so many

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BRUCE LEE

Continued from page 39

other examples, he could be very happy and pleasant. We often went to eat after workouts with him and had some really enjoyable times together."

Lee's instruction at the Seattle school was less frequent after his interest in California surfaced, and Kimura was in charge in Bruce's absence. "It was good to see Bruce when he could be there," Cowles relates, "but this was the beginning of the end for Seattle as far as his personal teaching was concerned. His new life was beginning to open up for him in California."

In 1970, Cowles moved to Texas and began and continues teaching. He holds classes at his *kwoon* (training hall) in Grand Prairie and instructs at the University of Texas at Arlington. Cowles stresses Lee did not authorize any teachers as representatives of the Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute and is the first to remind people that, like others who shared in that training experience some quarter of a century

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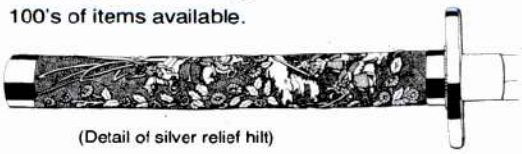

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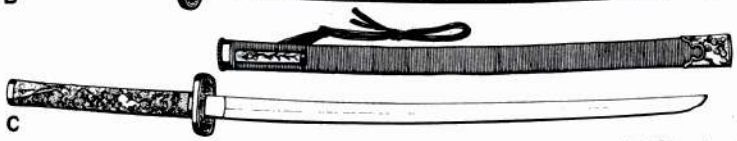

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ago, in the final analysis, one's own work cannot rest on the laurels of one's teacher, but must stand on a person's direct commitment to ethical practices and skill in technical training exercises.

Cowles' loyalty and respect for Lee are unquestionable. The photographs, personal correspondence and other objects of rare memorabilia he keeps close at hand are the only tangibles of the memories Cowles treasures from those early days. One cannot help but be impressed and genuinely moved by the complete lack of self-aggrandizement that characterizes wu-wei kung fu's leader. While Cowles feels the greatest tribute he can give Lee is to promulgate the ethical teaching of the skills Bruce taught him, the 56-year-old teacher respects the fact there was only *one* teacher representing the Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute.

"Bruce stated that 'Simplicity is the natural result of a long and profound study of the *way* of movements' and that 'If you understand the root, you will know all its blossoming.' In my own method, therefore, Bruce's teaching is left intact as the 'taproots' of movements which develop naturally

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out of the original teaching," Cowles explains. "The art, as I teach it, is called wu-wei kung fu. This is in order to emphasize the concept of wu-wei, to build upon Bruce's own original teaching (leaving it unchanged), and not to encroach upon any name or school Bruce had himself established. I do *not* claim to have originated or invented a new martial art. But I do honor and appreciate what Bruce taught me and the concepts he gave me."

Cowles chose the name of his school from a concept taught by Lee and discussed in Lee's first book *Chinese Gung Fu—The Philosophical Art of Self-Defense*. It identifies the concept of wu-wei as "spontaneous act," emphasizing the idea that the opponent's techniques become the techniques of the person on the other side of the action as well. "Bruce said it quite well," Cowles relates, "when he noted in his book that 'My mind is no longer distracted by the opponent, self, or formal techniques, etc. I have made my opponent's techniques my techniques; my task is simply to complete the other half of the oneness, and my action is that of wu-wei (spon-

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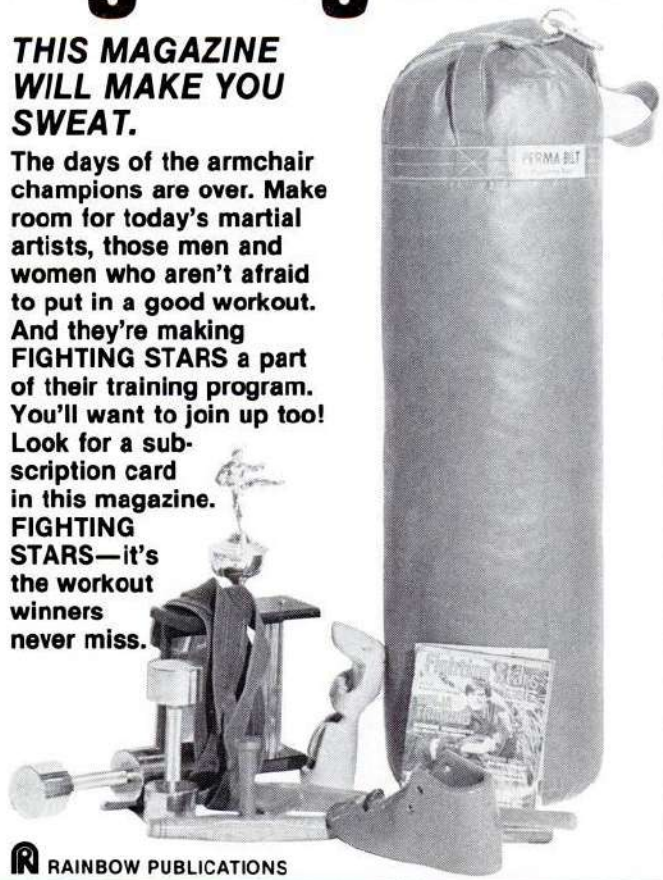

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taneous act), which is according to the circumstances without prearrangement.' "

In the end, Joseph Cowles leaves one with the convincing impression of a man deeply committed on a lifelong basis to the teaching and practice of his chosen martial art, yet one obviously well-aquainted with a number of disciplines. One can clearly assess his greatest tribute to his teacher, Bruce Lee, has been his ongoing efforts to provide the finest instruction he can and encourage his students in training excellence and personal integrity. His memories and memorabilia of those years with Lee provide an interesting glimpse into a time when the first seeds of a new era in martial arts were planted. Cowles' own efforts and contributions to the martial arts community give every evidence he not only reaped the benefits of that era, but has given at least as much as he has taken from that rare training experience.

About the Author: Michael J. Heenan is a freelance writer/photographer based in Oklahoma City.

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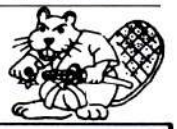

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